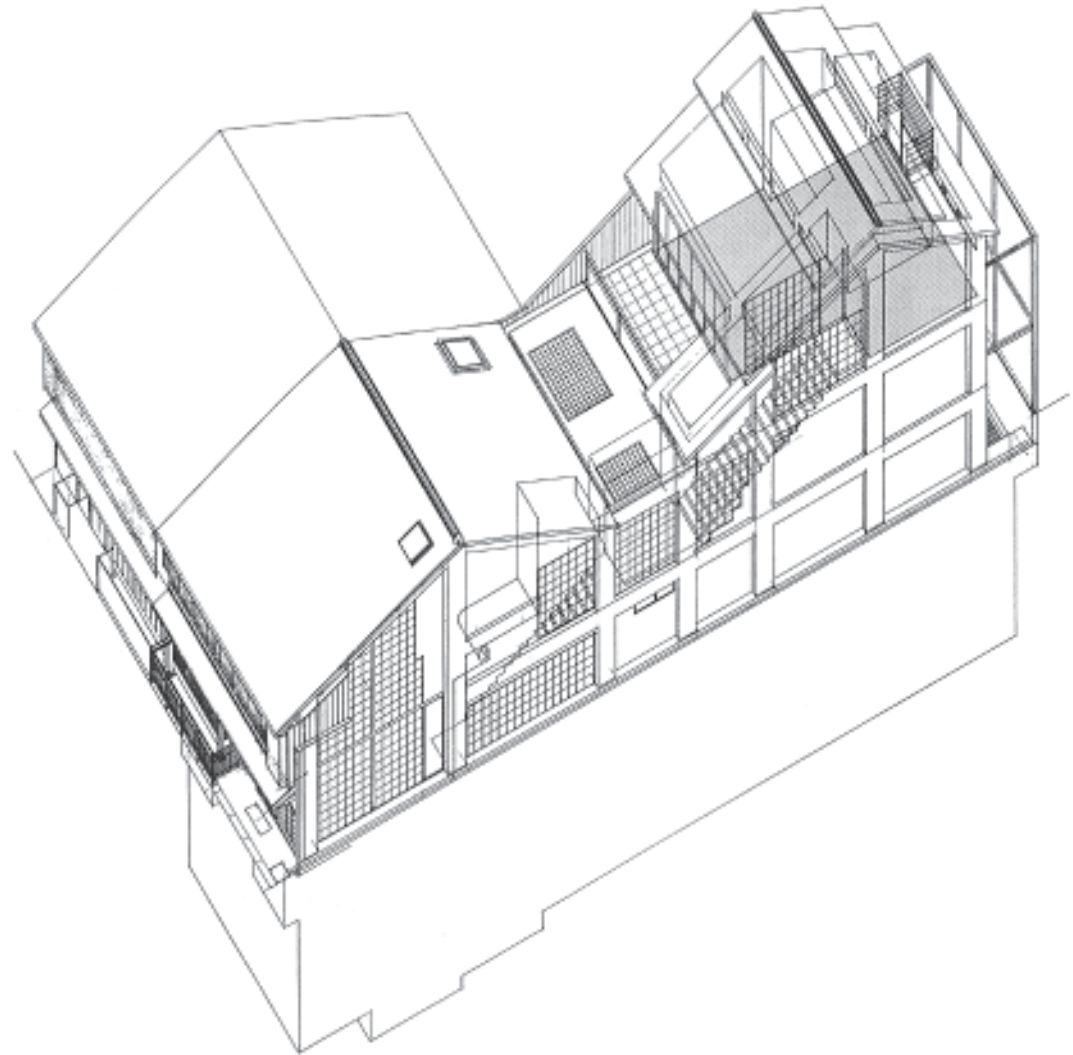


# Kyo-Machiya — The Cell Revitalizing the Whole

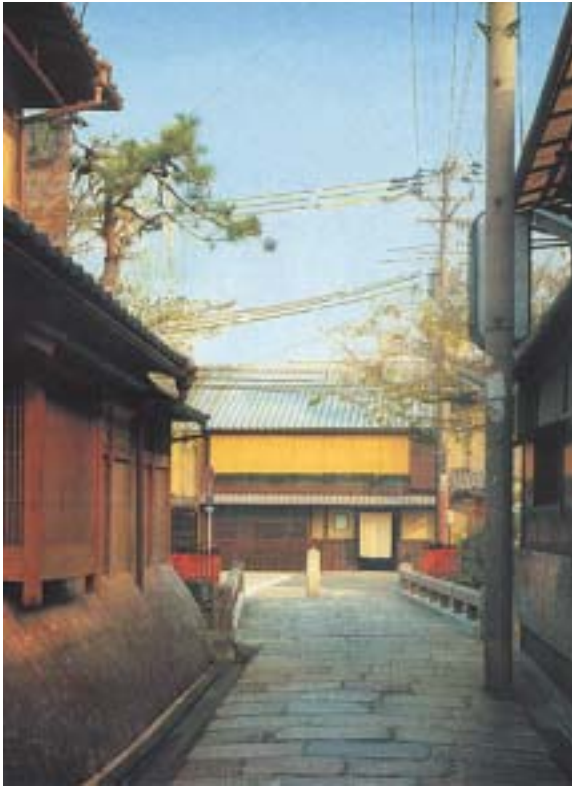
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## Unified town-scape lost



View towards a renovated *machiya* in the Preservation District in Gion Shimbashi, Kyoto.

The traditional Japanese town consisted of one or two stories high wooden structures in which temples and its pagodas would function as landmarks. One famous example is the pagoda of Toji temple which until recently determined the maximum building height in Kyoto to 31 meters. Due to a very dense building style often combining housing and shop or workshop as reflected in the *machiya* architecture, the city centers were densely populated with many shops lining the streets. The cityscape was as well unified through material and building style and at the same time lively due to the commercial activities taking place in the first floor of each building. Nevertheless, the volume of a traditional town house determined by the horizontal grid of the narrow and deep plots as well by the vertical frame of two stories was too small to accommodate new building types like offices, shopping centers and multi-family housing complexes.

As a result, due to the expansive economic development after the war, two stories wooden buildings were replaced rapidly by higher steel and concrete buildings and the town-scape of most Japanese cities changed fundamentally. Buildings of all shapes, materials and heights sprout like mushrooms and the connection between neighboring buildings and public space became arbitrary resulting in a loss of each city's unified character.

## Preservation districts

Even though the Japanese government made a considerable effort for the protection of a few outstanding religious buildings since the Meiji period and the twenties, only in the 1970s the value of assemblies of traditional vernacular buildings was taken into consideration. In 1972 Sanneizaka near Kiyomizu temple followed by Gion Shimbashi in 1974 were designated as a Special Preservation Area of Traditional Buildings, which was later

developed into a system called Preservation Districts for Groups of Historic Buildings (Den-ken). In these districts the preservation or restoration of the exterior of the buildings to the original traditional style is compulsory and the expenses are partially covered by grant subsidies. The number of 7 districts in 1976 is rising to 49 nowadays spread all over Japan, with most of them developed into tourist-highlights.

The Gion Shimbashi preservation district includes about 100 households on 1.4 hectares located in the famous Gion area, with teahouses lining the street almost same as in the late Edo period. The Shirakawa-river with its cherry trees and streets paved with stones like in old days add to the scenic beauty of this very small area, which is surrounded by a modern night-life district with buildings full of fancy bars and restaurants. The number of real teahouses hosting Geishas is of course decreasing, and normal restaurants, bars and shops are opened inside the traditional houses. The big challenge for a commercial building here is to attract people into the area and into the building itself, which looks due to the nature of its traditional facade style, which has to be preserved, rather closed to the outside.

### **Contrast of “old” and “new”**

I want to introduce here the Jo-in building constructed in 1987 by Yoshiteru Uesato and Seisetsusha Architects located in the center of the Gion Shimbashi district. As a whole it provides a future vision for traditional townscape, by coping with the aesthetic rules for preservation and as well with the needs of a modern inner-city commercial building, and therefore got the first Kyoto City Town-scape Preservation Prize.

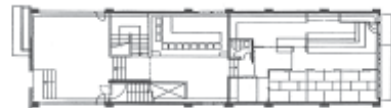
To appeal to the curiosity of people, behind the traditional façade some steps lead down to a two-story high public entrance hall, which can be seen behind the *noren* – curtain. The modern architectural language inside it



3<sup>rd</sup> floor



2<sup>nd</sup> floor



1<sup>st</sup> floor



basement



forms a strong contrast to the outside, even though a lot of the principals of a traditional *machiya* were used in the design. Analog to the wooden lattice-work *koshi* of the *kyo-machiyas*, a second inner façade of glass block curves up to the ceiling and plays with the effect of a translucent grid pattern. This modern layer shows the silhouette of the traditional structure by daylight and is light up from behind by night, allowing an unknown spatial experience of superimposed “old” and “new”.

### A new interpretation of *oku* - “depth”

This large entrance space serves for orientation and can be used for special events in the mixed used building, originally planned for a studio and boutique of a high-class fashion designer in the upper floors, a Chinese restaurant in the basement and a bar on street level. Behind the two stories façade a 4-5 story high building is inviting us to explore the depth *oku* of this site. *Oku* describes an aesthetical concept in which through the layering of spaces a sense of depth is produced which evokes the feeling of something hidden and mysterious. This coincides also with a higher degree of privacy the more we reach the back of traditional houses. In this building the layering of space is not only on the horizontal plane but rather 3-dimensional. Similar to the pathway *toori-niwa* in a traditional *machiya*, a straight stairway leads to the upper floor, with a roof terrace overlooking the surrounding. On the second floor the stair leads to a small garden *tsubo-niwa*. These controlled openings to the sky give us a feeling of liberation and contact to nature without letting the view of the messy city intrude too much into the spatial atmosphere of the building. This used to be the case with traditional *machiyas*, but often high-rise buildings in the neighborhood destroy the view of the enclosed space. That is why the protection of a whole assembly of buildings is important.

Entrance hall of the Jo-in: Comparable to the traditional wooden lattice work, the translucent inner façade creates a play of the visible and the hidden.



## Future Vision

The new structure is supported by concrete pillars and slabs and would allow to be multiplied continuously. If the neighboring houses were rebuild in a similar way, one could connect the entrance halls to both sides to form a kind of inner passage way, from which all the shops and restaurants could be reached as in the popular roofed shopping streets. In this way starting from the smallest planning element of one "shop" the vision for this building could be extended to city-scale.